Positionality Meets Agency: Dissertation Supervisor Agency, A Necessary Construct for Online Research Supervision

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Research Supervision

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Abstract

This conceptual paper critically explores the construct of agency from a dissertation research supervisor perspective. While the literature has expanded in the exploration of student agency, little focus has been given to the construct from a research supervisor agency stance. While current research into doctoral completion has shown the relationship between supervisor and dissertation writer as critical to persistence and completion, less investigation has focused on the aspects of dissertation supervisor agency and the evolution to a high mentoring approach especially for online doctoral students. The inquiry utilizes the lens of Lave and Wenger's situated learning theory to view how dissertation research supervisor agency can foster and guide doctoral scholars to consider researcher positionality and move from the margins of the doctoral learning community to the center of scholarly life and post-doctoral practice-based research and evidence-based decision making.

Background

  The key determinants of doctoral student persistence and dissertation research completion have highlighted the relationship between the doctoral candidate and dissertation research supervisor, mentor, or chair (Rigler, Bowlin, Sweat, Watts, & Throne, 2017; Throne, Oddi et al., 2017; Throne, Shaw, Fore, O'Connor Duffy, & Clowes, 2015) as well as the necessity for the research supervisor to possess the very human traits of trust, honesty, and effective communication, especially for online, hybrid, or part-time doctoral degree programs (Black, 2017; Gardner & Gopaul, 2012; Rademaker, Duffy, Wetzler, & Zaikina-Montgomery, 2016; Throne & Duffy, 2016). In a critical review of doctoral student attrition factors, we previously noted the high attrition rate in U.S. doctoral programs has proffered much research as to explain why doctoral students exit these programs prior to dissertation completion (Baghurst, 2013; Rigler et al., 2017) and over the past five years we have identified a positive, relational, and non-hierarchical mentoring supervision style continues to be reported as a key determinant for doctoral degree and dissertation research completion (Throne, Bourke et al., 2018; Throne & Duffy, 2016; Throne, Oddi et al., 2017; Throne, Shaw et al., 2015). Yet, online doctoral students repeatedly report problematic relationships with the dissertation supervisor as an impediment to dissertation completion (Akagi & Fore, 2016; Levitch & Shaw, 2014; Rigler et al., 2017) while doctoral program leadership attributes a supportive, high mentoring, and interactive relationship between dissertation supervisor and candidate as a significant factor in doctoral persistence (Baghurst, 2013; Cornér, Löfström, & Pyhältö, 2017; Kyvik & Olsen, 2014).

  Gardner (2009, 2010) and other past researchers have also reported dissertation researchers, regardless of spatiotemporal distance from the research supervisor or doctoral peers, require socialization (Cornér et al., 2017; Gardner & Gopaul, 2012; Rigler et al., 2017) and access to regular and instructional communication with the dissertation supervisor (Holmes, Trimble, & Morrison-Danner, 2014); in addition, this relationship must be socialized to involve meaningful interaction (Lave, 1991, 1996; Rademaker et al., 2016; Throne, Shaw et al., 2015). Whereas, supervisors overly involved in their own research agenda and not regularly available for supervision, interaction, and feedback were reported as detrimental to dissertation research completion (Holmes et al., 2014; Rigler et al., 2017; Van de Schoot, Yerkes, Mouw, & Sonneveld, 2013). To this end, dissertation supervisors who initiated regular and consistent student-supervisor meetings reported higher doctoral completion rates (Rigler et al., 2017;

Throne, Oddi et al., 2017). Thus, as doctoral candidates engage opportunities to interact with the dissertation research supervisor, it is essential for a socialized, cooperative, and supportive relationship to be established based on clear expectations between the candidate and supervisor (Gardner, 2009, 2010; Hardre & Hackett, 2015; Rigler et al., 2017), and within this relationship, the dissertation candidate requires a research supervisor willing to extend the supervisory relationship beyond task completion and manuscript milestones, instead willing to provide the individualized instruction, social support, and the mentoring necessary for dissertation research completion.

From the review of the literature, it remains consistently clear the dissertation supervisor is a pivotal determinant of doctoral student success and dissertation research completion; yet, few doctoral programs require or even provide the specific professional development opportunities for dissertation supervisors to develop mentoring skills or the relational aspects needed, and more often qualify supervisors due to subject matter expertise or research agenda versus effective mentoring (Black, 2017; Rigler et al., 2017) or evaluation of the relational aspects of honesty, trust, and quality interactions and communication (Rademaker, 2015). Therefore, we find it necessary to develop a shared understanding of the construct of dissertation supervisor agency and the essential characteristics for the profile of a dissertation research supervisor with capacity to ensure quality dissertation research is conducted by new doctoral investigators and may guide them to evolve into engaged participants within the doctoral scholarly community (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Gardner, 2010; Throne, Bourke et al., 2018; Throne & Duffy, 2016; Throne, Oddi et al., 2017).

Dissertation Supervisor Agency Defined

The educational research into student agency has been extensive and studies into graduate student agency have noted the critical resource of student agency necessary before and after graduation to seek ideal professional or academic positions (Jaeger et al., 2017; O'Meara et al., 2014) and similar to dissertation research supervisor agency, the professional learning community in which one serves often influences agency (O'Meara et al., 2014) whereas graduate education leadership should explore programs, activities, and/or services to support the development of graduate student agency (Jaeger et al., 2017). Further, past researchers have noted the importance of the student-faculty mentoring relationship to promote student agency (Griffin, Eury, & Gaffney, 2015) and critical to learning engagement (Klemenčič, 2015), which

we, based on practice measures within our own doctoral learning community, claim as even more essential for online learning engagement (Nyysti & Walters, 2018).

With this rationale for the importance of promotion of student agency, our collective understanding of dissertation supervisor agency predominantly emerged from our past work toward a situated dissertation advising framework (SDAF) (Akagi & Fore, 2016; Clowes, Shaw, & Throne, 2016; Throne, Bourke et al., 2018; Throne & Duffy, 2016; Throne, Oddi et al., 2017; Throne, Shaw et al., 2015) where we identified key characteristics among a formal approach needed by online dissertation research supervisors to improve online doctoral student persistence and dissertation completion especially among the dissertation research phase of a doctoral program. We utilized a parallel construct with student agency for the self-reflective intentionality (Klemenčič, 2015) needed by the dissertation research supervisor to engage a graduate student researcher to foster student agency and the skills necessary to evolve as an independent researcher. Thus, the concept of dissertation supervisor agency in this work has evolved since 2015 to the current definition with prior iterations focused on chair efficacy, strong mentoring ethos, healthy and diverse communication style, empathy, and non-hierarchical relational trust between the supervisor and doctoral candidate (Rademaker, 2015; Rademaker et al., 2016; Throne, Oddi et al., 2017; Throne, Shaw et al., 2015; Wetzler, Duffy, Fish, & Rademaker, 2016) as well as supervisor *agency* as a determinant for doctoral candidate persistence (Rigler et al., 2017; Throne, Bourke et al., 2018). Gardner and Blackstone (2017) also noted faculty agency is influenced by external cues within the social and academic environment thereby dissertation supervisor agency may be more so shaped by the doctoral learning community the supervisor resides within rather than by individual directedness. Our conceptual definition was also informed by Black's (2017) multi-faceted five criteria specific to online dissertation research supervision that included (a) genuineness, (b) knowledgeable, (c) climate of trust, (d) climate of connectedness, (e) personal and professional ethics and guided by Robinson, Morgan, and Reed's (2016) concept of disruptive dissertation research. (see Figure 1).

Theoretical Context

We framed the theoretical context for the SDAF with situated learning theory first posited by Lave (1991) and expanded to involve the relation to the learning community by Lave and Wenger (1991) where the authors elucidated learning as occurring normally and *situated* within any embedded learning activity, context, or culture, which in our case consists of the

doctoral learning community both pre- and post-dissertation research (Throne, Shaw et al., 2015). Similarly to what Lave and Wenger (1991) postulated, we often see online dissertation researchers first reside at the far edge of the doctoral learning community while they complete course work and then become further embedded as they accomplish milestone achievements such as oral or written examinations, student conference presentations, culminating in the dissertation research experience and ultimately the defense of the dissertation research study findings (Black, 2017; Bowlin, Buckner, & Throne, 2016). As these online dissertation researchers become further socialized within the conventions and expectations of doctoral-level research, they become active and engaged members of the community and assume a pinnacle role as they defend the dissertation research and are further guided by the dissertation supervisor to a future research agenda as they earn the expert credential for the discipline (Lave, 1991, 1996; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Throne, Shaw et al., 2015).

Dissertation Supervisor Agency and Researcher Positionality

Like student agency, a dissertation supervisor can facilitate the articulation of researcher positionality is a necessary process of a principal investigator for critical self-reflection and a determination of self within the social constructs, biases, contexts, layers, power structures, identities, transparency, objectivity and subjectivities for the viewpoint assumed within the research (Bourke, 2014; Throne, 2012) (see Figure 2). We have previously reported the necessity to consider researcher positionality within the within the multi-faceted, complex, and necessary structures surrounding an inquiry before it could or should be engaged as well as consideration for the transparency necessary to the perspectives brought to the respective inquiry including researcher as instrument (Bourke, 2014; Throne, 2012). While positionality purports the power structures and social identities of the researcher, it allows the new investigator a reflexive space to articulate a self-identity that positions an individual space within the scholarship of the field or discipline and within a clear vantage point by which to draw out conclusions and implications of research findings. Like student agency, we have previously noted how and why the articulation of the dissertation writer's positionality is a necessary process for critical self-reflection and a determination of *self* within the social constructs, biases, contexts, layers, power structures, identities, transparency, objectivity and subjectivities for the viewpoint assumed within the research (Throne, Bourke et al., 2018). This narrative placement allows for researcher objectivity and subjectivity whereby the researcher is situated within the many aspects of

perspective and positionality (Lave & Wenger, 1991), and often serves to inform a research study rather than to invalidate it as biased or contaminated by personal perspectives and social or political viewpoints (Bourke, 2014; Bowlin et al., 2016; Throne, Bourke et al., 2018).

A doctoral candidate acquires a researcher identity whereby the candidate must consider and integrate through an iterative and evolutionary process of reflection and integration throughout the research experience to distinguish an emergent positionality, and these perspectives often evolve post-doc as the researcher continues to engage within the scholarly community (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Throne, Shaw et al., 2015). Consideration for the inherent dualities of insider/outsider and positionality can offer a transparency necessary to the perspectives brought to the inquiry especially for practice-based research a doctoral graduate may navigate from a post-doc perspective (Bowlin et al., 2016). Bias and predilection remain naturally occurring human characteristics, and researcher positionality is often used in the context of the inductive approach to social science inquiry as an exploration of the investigator's reflection on one's own placement within the many contexts, layers, power structures, identities, and subjectivities of the viewpoint (England, 1994; Ganga & Scott, 2006). However, the dissertation supervisor can utilize agency to ensure the graduate student researcher conducts this essential and valuable self-examination, especially those who desire to focus on a dissertation research problem from professional practice, social justice, or other community activism (Throne, Bourke et al., 2018).

Researcher positionality is also often considered a necessary process of a principal investigator for critical self-reflection and a determination of *self* within the social constructs, biases, contexts, layers, power structures, identities, transparency, objectivity and subjectivities for the viewpoint assumed within the research. The acknowledgement of the role and potential influence of researcher bias is a critical component of qualitative researcher. Through acknowledging biases, and subjectivities, both of which are products of individual positionalities, qualitative researchers engage themselves as part of the researcher. Researcher positionality shifts during the dissertation journey as doctoral scholars acquire a researcher identity whereby an iterative and evolutionary process of reflection and integration occurs throughout the research, and the dissertation supervisor must guide the doctoral scholar to recognize and take into account the situated positionality within the research setting as well as utilize an integrative process is to assess the multiple identities as professional practitioner, scholar, and investigator as

positionality must also be considered within the multi-faceted, complex, and necessary structures surrounding research within the discipline (Throne, Bourke et al., 2018).

Dissertation Supervisor Agency and Engagement within the Doctoral Community

Doctoral education contributes to a knowledge-driven society in preparing scholar-practitioners who will use formal inquiry to solve problems and discover innovations that benefit leadership. In an online community of practice, it is essential for doctoral candidates to evolve in understanding empirical research for workplace evidence-based decision making or practice-based research (Throne & Duffy, 2016) especially for graduates of practitioner doctoral programs (Robinson et al., 2016; Throne, 2012). Likewise, theory-based dissertation research allows for dissertation researchers to evolve conceptually and positionally when the dissertation research supervisor draws the candidate into the online doctoral community (Lave & Wenger, 1991), the odds of doctoral completion are increased as well as reduced feelings of isolation (Croxton, 2014; Gardner, 2010; Rigler et al., 2017). Finally, as Ruuska (2017) and Milner (2007) noted, memory manifests in relation to place as dependent upon multiple factors, including researcher positionality, and the contextualities of environment and time allow for multiplicity in meaning, interpretation, and ultimately contextual truth, and as a lens to view the other through disruption to ensure narrative voice is viewed devoid of dominance.

Similarly, dissertation supervisor agency can be a crucial factor for the promotion of student agency (Jaeger et al., 2017; O'Meara et al., 2014), and in the development of the doctoral candidate's continued development as independent investigator and ongoing research after graduation (Griffin et al., 2015; Klemenčič, 2015). As doctoral candidates present research findings beyond the dissertation defense and achieve a level of self-awareness and reflexivity necessary for their own sense of agency and positionality, they are best prepared for practice-based research (Bowlin et al., 2016; Clowes et al., 2016). Even more important, as the dissertation candidate moves on to the professional and research opportunities after graduation, as well as continued research, publication, or ongoing collaboration with the dissertation research supervisor (Black, 2017), the assimilation of agency remains an essential adoption and integration for both supervisor and candidate to engage a recurrent and meaningful research agenda.

Discussion and Conclusions

We know that doctoral student persistence and dissertation research completion can be enhanced by a quality relationship between the doctoral candidate and dissertation research supervisor (Levitch & Shaw, 2014; Rigler et al., 2017; Throne, Oddi et al., 2017; Throne, Shaw et al., 2015) as well as the necessity for the research supervisor to possess agency as demonstrated via trust, honesty, and effective communication (Black, 2017; Gardner & Gopaul, 2012; Rademaker, 2015; Rademaker et al., 2016; Throne & Duffy, 2016). Further, past researchers have noted the importance of the student-faculty mentoring relationship to promote student agency and learning engagement (Griffin et al., 2015; Klemenčič, 2015; Nysti & Walters, 2018), and to foster the research supervisor's own agency (Black, 2017; Gardner & Blackstone, 2017; Jaeger et al., 2017; O'Meara et al., 2014). Thus, dissertation supervisor agency can be a crucial factor for the promotion of student agency (Jaeger et al., 2017; O'Meara et al., 2014), articulation of researcher positionality (Bourke, 2014; Throne, 2012; Throne, Bourke et al., 2018), and a doctoral candidate's continued development as independent investigator and ongoing research after graduation (Griffin et al., 2015; Klemenčič, 2015). Through a lens of Lave and Wenger's (1991) situated learning theory and our past work into the SDAF (Clowes et al., 2016; Throne, Oddi et al., 2017; Throne, Shaw et al., 2015; Throne & Duffy, 2016), we call for further consideration into measures for dissertation research supervisor agency to be further explored and expanded so as to better guide doctoral scholars from the margins of the doctoral learning community to the center of scholarly life and ongoing research.

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Figure 1. Disruptive dissertation research (Robinson et al., 2016; Throne, Shaw et al., 2015)

Accessible
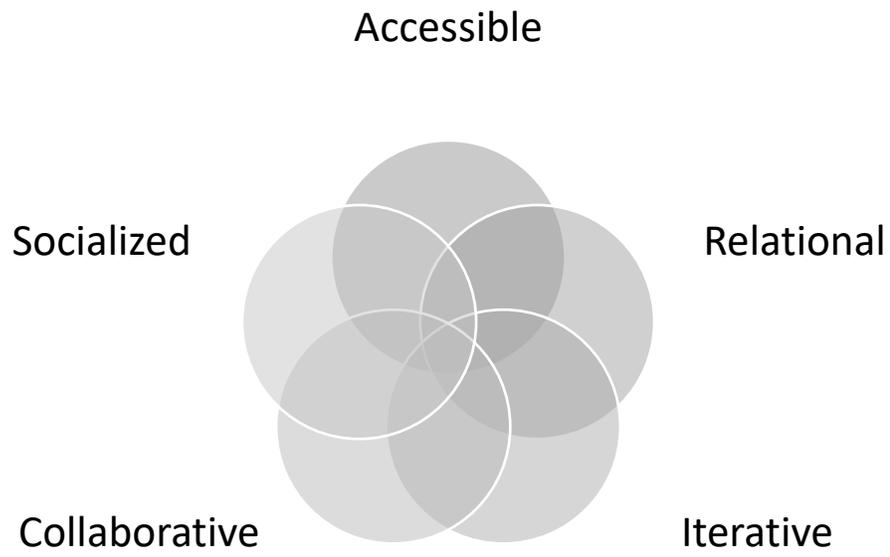
Socialized

Relational

Collaborative

Iterative

Figure 2. Situated dissertation researcher positionality (Throne, Bourke et al., 2018).